

WHAT IS KARMA (KIṂ KARMETI)?
AN EXERCISE IN PHILOSOPHICAL SEMANTICS

At a recent conference on « karman and rebirth »¹, I was widely suspected to have made a joke when I observed that the sense of « karma » most familiar to me was that of the grammatical « direct object »: *īpsitatamaṃ karma*². The « joke » of course presumes a commonplace: that the senses of « karma » worth enquiring into must have to do either with a reality principle (as when the world and the sacrifice are both said to be a « karma ») or a condition of moral or ethical bondage (as when « karma » is said to be the mechanism of *saṃsāra*). Grammar deals with mere « words »; it cannot capture the *seriousness* of the *kosmos*.

Yet the conference was animated by one of the laudable trends of current research on India: that indigenous conceptual systems are best enquired into through terms that are recognizably indigenous³. One, therefore, runs a certain risk in laughing at those dimensions of a conceptual system that are *most* strikingly « indigenous », such as the fact that « karma » means also « direct object » and is functionally equivalent to our term « passive voice ». Our understanding of the term's cosmic and ethical significance may in fact depend on our explaining that « coincidence ».

And this is precisely the issue that I want to raise in this paper, taking as my text Renou's well known reference to the grammatical karma: « karman "action" (en tant qu'objet direct, objet du verbe transitif) appartient aux milieux rituels où le mot, depuis le RV, dési-

1. *Workshop on Karma and Rebirth*; Lake Wilderness, Washington, Oct. 22-23, 1976. See « Minutes » mimeographed, subsequently cited.

2. « kartur īpsitatamaṃ karma » PĀṆINI (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*) 1.4.49 « ... la chose que l'agent souhaite atteindre par dessus toute autre (porte le nom de) karman ("objet-direct")... ».

3. Cf. MARRIOTT and INDEN, *Toward an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems*, to appear in DAVID, *The New Wind...*, The Hague, Chicago.

gnait l'acte par excellence, c'est à dire, le rite »⁴. But is the grammatical meaning of « karma » simply a function and a reflex of the term's other (or more general) meanings, as this quote suggests, or is it also at the heart of any proper understanding of those more general meanings? Let us consider how we might inquire into that latter possibility as we ponder another of Renou's remarks: adhérer à la pensée indienne, c'est d'abord penser en grammarien⁵.

An inquiry into indigenous conceptual systems begins, whether we like it or not, with words, which often we do not even translate — « karma » (« action/act ») — and is thus in principle a *grammatical* problem. The straightforward or first level question, « what does karma mean? » if successfully answered will put us in command of an indigenous dictionary wherein are delimited the term karma and its symbiotic relatives (conceptual: such as dharma, yāga; or etymological: such as kriyā, kartr) ⁶, and as well these terms' usage or capacity to combine (their « syntax »).

But when we inquire into « karma » we use concepts indigenous to our own standards of expression; the term may assume meaning and functions that derive from the syntax and context of our inquiry. Even when untranslated, the term absorbs senses from the English sentence context that it does not or cannot have in Sanskrit and thereby loses even the clarity of being an « unknown quantity ». For example, « Does fate equal karma, or is karma used to explain fate? »⁷. By leaving the term untranslated the « appearance » of a new technical term is created in English itself: *karma*, which « appearance » only conceals the analytical fatuousness of the question itself. If « true », then indeed « fate equals fate » and if not, « fate does not equal fate ».

Many of our questions are also naive in the sense that they must ignore relations that are implicit in the Sanskrit vocabulary; and they are equally moot in that they can, therefore, be answered « yes » in terms of one set of lexical contingencies, and « no » in terms of another. One's karma is indeed one's dharma, if by « karma » we mean « kartavya »⁸ and it is equally *not*, provided we take karma in its siddha (« accomplished, reified ») sense of « kṛta », distinguished thereby from one's dharma⁹.

And so from the Gītā we take our third text: kim karma kim akarmeti kavayo'py atra mohitāḥ¹⁰.

4. JA, 1941-42, p. 157; reprinted STAAL, *A Reader on the Sanskrit Grammarians*, p. 464 (Cambridge, 1972). Also cited by CARDONA, *Pāṇini*, p. 231, who, nevertheless, calls attention to the difficulties in simply *equating* the terms from the two milieux.

5. IC², § 1519.

6. Often « duty/caste 'duty' »; « (vedic) sacrifice »; « action/activity »; « agent ».

7. Question 18, p. 3, *Minutes of Workshop on Karma and Rebirth...*

8. As in the Gītā and Vedic texts.

9. As in the advaita texts and the physical treatises.

10. 4.16, cited N. N. BHIDE, *infra* note 47.

This inquiry is *about* a grammatical problem and is grammatical by method. It is, therefore, insufficient simply to propose *removing* such terminological confusions as a mode of problem-solving. The inter-language character of the problem is the problem and cannot be eschewed unless and until we *all* speak English. Where terms are not translated, as in the naive question « what is karma »? one language (here Sanskrit) is in effect made the object of inquiry in a context where the other defines the methodology and solution. In making such a distinction between our « method » and their « reality » what we miss is that in the present case there are no objects other than words: the « term » karma is nothing but its use by Indians variously to organize and illuminate their experience; the problem is signalled for us not by the fact that the experience is necessarily different or « indigenous » (for there would be in that case no basis for comparison; no *simile* for inquiry), but by the fact that the *term* or its « translation » is functionless in our experience, that is, not used to organize our world. This difference of *form* (more than of content) suggests that our problem is more akin to that of the possibility of different grammars: different organizations of the « same » world: a world that, therefore, not only seems variable but achieves distinction and precision in its variety. To a certain extent then the inquiry into karma becomes thirdly an exercise in rethinking the world (assuming for the moment karma is a crucial term in the Indian « world »), and an exercise in giving up our own or « native » grammar. Thus the « grammatical » problem insensibly becomes, for us, an *ethical* and philosophical problem¹¹.

We derive from this introduction the three topics of 1) Lexicon, 2) Syntax, and 3) Kosmos for the main body of this paper: 1) the *term* karma is important in Indian theory, which suggests that we examine first the Indian lexicon; 2) the *syntax* of the term karma is an important issue when the term is used in propositions or to form questions, which suggests that we inquire into the linkages of karma to other terms; specifically the grammatical « karma » that is itself used to explicate a sentence model, or syntax; and 3) the *semantics* of the term karma as determined by the grammarians may be crucial to our understanding of its various *contexts*, or « worlds », which suggests that we examine whether the wider or « non-grammatical » karma may not itself be implied by a grammar that has already been worked out by the grammarians¹².

11. Cf. WITTGENSTEIN, Phil. Unter. I.19, *Und eine Sprache vorstellen heisst, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen*.

12. ASHOK AKLUJKAR suggests the following caveat at this point: « The theory / view of karman that the first employment of the term in grammatical discussions presupposed is to be distinguished from the theory that developed around karman as a technical term. But speculation on the first is equally interesting ». YĀSKA, for example, uses *karman* in the sense of « action ». See notes 21 and 42 and, in general, discussions of the ritual origins of Indian technical terminology: cf. CARDONA, p. 231.

Each of these reference points is supported by an observation which in isolation may appear paradoxical, but which when put in the context of our problematic, encourages us in our inquiry: viz. (1) In the Indian lexica, the « grammatical » sense of *karma* is invariably given *first*, suggesting its primary character¹³. (2) In the Indian grammar, the sentence or assertion is both an act (in its own right) and takes an act (*kriyā/karma*) for its content¹⁴, which clarifies both the place of grammar within ritual and the formal model of the grammar itself, which is not merely actional, but « intentional » without being « volitional »¹⁵. (3) It is a grammarian, Bhartṛhari, who, speculating on the cosmic-mystic sense of « karma », establishes a *coherence* among the Indian views of karma that derives ultimately from the notion's *grammaticality*. It is perhaps Bhartṛhari who provided the rationale for the transformation of a *word* for « action » (*karma*) into the status of a world- or reality-principle in Indian speculation, a status that words for « being » enjoy in our own. And this surely is the *general* issue that focusses our interest in the Indian's « exaggeration » of karmic matters, and expresses best the alienation we feel in the presence of the notion « karma »; for (to capture its philosophical seriousness) we ought to be able to translate it not as τὸ πράγμα but as τὸ ὄν¹⁶.

(A) Karma in the lexicon. A term suffused with as many ambiguities — cultural and contextual — as *karma* surely needs definition. In order to hold the cultural ambiguities to a minimum we examine the voluminous Sanskritic lexical tradition. The fact that Sanskrit is defined through Sanskrit establishes as purely as possible the Indian contexts of relevance, and deletes the most troublesome source of ambiguity: that we naively assume our own language as method.

Most useful is the compendium of Tarkavācaspati, the *Vācaspatyam*, which conflates in six encyclopaedic volumes of ca. 4000 pages the Sanskritic lexical traditions. Compiled between 1865 and 1875 (?) by a team of orthodox pundits, it reflects the intellectual fluctuations of the medieval period without showing the least trace (save in its motivation) of Western influence. In its third volume approximately fifty (pp. 1724-71)

13. NILS SIMONSSON points out an exception in the Nyāyakośa.

14. *kriyāvacano dhātuḥ* [Vārttika ad P 1.3.1] « the (verbal) root expresses an act(ivity) ». The verb [al idea] is of course for the grammarians the head of the sentence, as against Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya. See notes 32 and 39, *infra*.

15. The most generally applicable rules in the grammar seem conditioned by and to explicate the speaker's *intention*, as for example, P 3.2.123 « varttamāne laṭ ». « Les desinences du "lat" valent quand il s'agit de l'actuel » (RENOU, *op. cit.*, p. 206), or rather « on condition of (wishing to express) presence, the suffixes of the present (are enjoined) ». It is the Nyāya that seems to have adopted a « volitional » model. Our discussion of « bhāva » in what follows will make this clear.

16. Cf. K. A. S. IYER, *Bhartṛhari, a Study of the Vākyapadīya...*, Poona, 1969, esp. ch. 6 « On action » (*kriyā*). Words for « being », when they do figure in the discussion (as in the Vārttika, « bhāvacano dhātuḥ », or YĀSKA's, « bhāvapradhānam ākhyātam », are invariably interpreted in actional terms (as KAIYAṬA, « bhāvavacanāḥ kriyāmātravācī »; IYER, p. 329).

pages are devoted to karma and compounds beginning with *karman*-¹⁷; of these pages two entries occupy the bulk; karma itself (pp. 1730-37) and the compound « *karma-vipāka* » (pp. 1742-70). Although the latter entry is central to other concerns of the karma theorists, detailing 80 or so consequences in later births of various (mostly immoral) behavior in this one, we pass it by here, as being itself consequential and not crucial to an understanding of *karma*.

We find, *sub karma*, five contextual meanings distinguished in principle; that is, all the variety of meaning which the term has undoubtedly had over ca. 35 centuries, is reported under five general headings, which are (as we would expect in an Indian undertaking) not historically, but *śāstraically*, motivated. As noted earlier, a meaning attributed to *Vyākaraṇa*, or the Pāṇinian grammar, is given in *primo loco*; follow senses said to pertain to the *Vaiśeṣika* system (realistic pluralism or atomism, and one of the « six systems »), (3) *Hari* (i.e., *Bhartṛhari*, the sixth century linguistic philosopher who established grammar as a vehicle suitable for the *mokṣamārga*), (4) to *Mīmāṃsā*, under which are grouped almost all the senses of the term *karma* pertaining to the Vedic period and to the ritual traditions, and (5) agriculture (*kṛṣi*) (though this latter meaning is for the most part *Vedic*).

We will now inventory the various senses of *karma*, before proceeding to the second part of this paper, which will attempt to assess the *significance* of the emphasis on grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) among these meanings. In doing so we will somewhat alter the order as given in the lexicon, proceeding perhaps in a way more suited to a Western sense of order, from the *least* to the *most* grammatical meaning.

(5) Agriculture/*kṛṣi*. At issue here is a sense akin to that of Hesiod's « Works and Days»: and one which would appear to be closer to a literal and valueless sense of « act » than any other. But even here the term *karma* is related to the terms which enliven its « abstract » uses, especially « *phala* », for the « fruits » of ploughing are indeed its consequences. « *phalaṃ karmāyattam* »¹⁸ say the *mīmāṃsakas*, playing on both senses. And « *phalasya karmaniṣpatter lokavat* »¹⁹. None of the phrases adduced in establishing this sense unequivocally refers to « ploughing » in such a way as to rule out an implication of the more philosophical meaning. In fact, this « literal » sense of *karma* seems

17. There is often variation in Western texts between these two forms of the same word. Briefly, « *karma* », is the fully inflected nominative singular (neuter), whereas « *karman*- » is the so-called stem form, without any inflection. It is normal to cite Sanskrit nouns in the latter form (*Nala*, not *Nala-s*), but evidently because it is confusing to Western readers to think of a longer form as uninflected, « *karman* » (and most other *n*-stems) constitute exceptions to the rule. We will try to conform to this practice (cf. *brahma* and *brahman*).

18. « The fruit depends on the act » (p. 1737).

19. « Since the fruit is the result of the act, just as in the world » (*ibid.*), said to be from *Jaimini*.

necessary only to justify the explanation of its abstract meanings, « *tad yatheha karmacitalokaḥ kṣīyate* »²⁰.

(4) The *mīmāṃsakas* (or « *vaidikas* »). Under this heading are grouped the « types » of karma that express most clearly its ritual and voluntaristic or moral aspects, but exclude its elemental and cosmic senses. The *yāga*, or « sacrifice », the *karma* par excellence, is not defined as such, but rather classified according to several bi- or tri-partite distinctions that indeed sum up the moral teaching of Hinduism. A karma is first of all (a) either *nitya* « obligatory » — without reference to an occasion, as *saṃdhyāvandana*, or *naimittika*, « obligatory given an occasion », such as the life cycle rituals, or *kāmya*, « voluntary » (where the self is the occasion) such as the *aśvamedha*; (b) secondly, karma may be classified with specific reference to its consequence or *phala*, inasmuch as a karma may be done without positing a fruit (as presumes the first type of the former classification) and is called « *sāttvika* »; or may be done for a fruit and must involve effort (such as the third type) and is called « *rājasa* », or have an evil and perhaps unwanted effect, and be termed « *tāmasa* ». This classification covers a wider field than the former, including a greater range of moral options, and demons as agents and perhaps also error. It is also clearly *Sāṃkhyan*, speaking historically. The third classification (c) adds the dimension of motivation or subjective choice to the second according as an action may tend to better the condition of the agent (and be *śukla*) or to worsen it (and be *kṛṣṇa*) or be neutral (and be *kṛṣṇaśukla*). Presumed here evidently is the entire theory of rebirth and *saṃsāra*, which provides a teleology for the individual actor. The subjective end, as distinguished from the objective (or *phala*), is made a variable of distinction. (d) Lastly, karma is said to be two-fold insofar as it tends to promote (*pravṛtta*) or discourage (*nivṛtta*) further action. The former is « *kāmapūrvakam* », presumptive of a desire, the latter is « *jñānapūrvakam* », presumptive of knowledge. Here the fourth goal *mokṣa*, the non-goal, has been added to the theory as a variable, in such a way again as to deflate the foregoing distinctions, for all actions tending to their own continuity (in effect, all of the above) are now limited by an action that is in some sense not an action at all. We have now brought the *Vedānta* under our « *vedic* » rubric.

(2) *Vaiśeṣika*: The *vaiśeṣikas* (realists), according to the lexicographer, consider karma not so much in its ethical or psychic dimension, but as a physical category: karma here means *motion*, and is specifically distinguished from volition and will (*yatna*). In the category schema with which the *Vaiśeṣika* is associated, karma in effect becomes synonymous with « *kriyā* », one of the four basic existential categories (with *jāti*, genus or universal class; *guṇa*, quality; and *dravya*, substance or indivi-

20. « So just as here [in this transmigration] the world accumulated by acts perishes » (*ibid.*).

dual). Yatna, or psychological « motion » is considered, on the contrary, to fall under the category « guṇa », as do all the psychic states (« qualities » of substance not involving motion). The vaiśeṣika view of « motion » resembles Aristotle's, in being subdivided into different local types, of which locomotion (gamana) is one. The others are rising (utkṣepaṇa), descending (avakṣepaṇa), contraction (ākuñcana) and expansion (prasaraṇa). Interestingly, we find no « decay », as this involves a change of state, and, therefore, is *qualitative* (ref. guṇa)²¹.

(1) Vyākaraṇa: The bulk of the lexical entry on karma is devoted to this discussion. It is not only the first item treated but is accorded the greatest expository development (pp. 1730-35). *Vistarabhayāt* we will note here only the highlights and distinguishing characteristics of this long section.

Of course, in one sense grammar is entitled to precede other classifications, having inherited from the older Nirukta its most basic function: nirvacana, or the etymological analysis of words. « karman » itself is suitably explained by reference to its root element (kṛ-) and suffix (man-[in]), with notes as to its gaṇas (word classes conditioning certain types of rule eligibility). But this, like the etymologies in Webster's, is meant as prologue to the main entry, and is not to be confused with it.

The original contribution of grammar to the « meaning » of karma is of course Pāṇini's definition of what we call the accusative case or direct object. « The direct object is that which [to reach] is most desirable to the agent [of the verbal action]²². Clearly we are in a volitional mode, but unlike that of the mīmāṃsaka, the stress is less on the effect (phala), which is after all supra-mundane, and more on the process itself (vyāpāra)²³. On the other hand the Vaiśeṣika emphasis on objective motion is incommensurate with the grammarian's « karma », which is in the first place the object of a *desire*.

This type of karma, patterned in a theory of general verbal syntax, is subject to several sets of distinctions, which further clarify its essential character. First, grammatical karma is said to be threefold (following Bhartṛhari), as it is (a) nirvartyam, or created (ex nihilo, yad asaṅg jāyate), as « he makes a pot »; (b) vikāryam, or modified (out of an already existent) as « he makes ear-rings [of gold] »; or (c) prāpyam, or attained: the « object » of the verb of motion (the completion of whose

21. Included among the bhāvavikāras of Yāska, *jāyate 'sti vipariṇamate vardhate 'pakṣiyate vinaśyati* (cited also MBh ad 1.3.1 [NSP, p. 124]). The matter pertains to the grammatical « vikāryam », infra.

22. Supra, note 2.

23. *kā punaḥ kriyā / ihā / kā punar ihā / ceṣṭā / kā punaś ceṣṭā / vyāpārah* (MBh ad Vt « kriyāvacano dhātuh », P 1.3.1 [NSP, p. 114], what is « kriyā »? striving). What is « striving »? movement. What is « movement »? process (!). The pretext here is perhaps the already cited evidence that many legitimate « direct objects » and other uses of the accusative (as « poison » in the sentence « The King drinks poison ») are not « desired » at all by their agents.

activity does not modify the object in any way, as with verbs of pure motion: the « going » does not change the town reached)²⁴. Already we can see that these principles of definition function to mediate what appear to be the opposed « karmas » of the vaiśeṣikas and the mīmāṃsakas, the « objective » and the « ethical » karmas.

Referring specifically to the « most desired » [īpsitatamam] element of the sūtra, the essence of the relation between the agent, or producer of the effort, and his « result » is summed up thus: taking the first triad as expressing the varieties of « karma » that are in fact (consciously *desired*, we may add four more, as « karma » is (d) neither desired nor not desired, as « he touches grass [while going to the village] », (e) in fact explicitly *not* desired, as in the example « he drinks poison », (f) unmentioned (akathitam) by other technical kāraka designations, and (g) required by concord (purely and simply [anyapūrvakam])²⁵. The latter two types of « karma » share the unintentionality of the previous two types, but find their motivation in the syntax itself rather than in the indifference or « ignorance » of the so-called agent. Under « unmentioned » are grouped the double direct objects of Sanskrit, as « gām payo dogdhi » (lit.: « he milks the cow milk »). The last category comprehends those cases of the accusative (and any other case in similar circumstances) which are not directly motivated by a relation to the verb, but rather are what they are by virtue of agreement with a term already so motivated. In Sanskrit and most Indo-European languages, qualifying adjectives take the case (number, etc.) of their noun. The Indian grammarians realized that this use of « accusative » served a quite different function than did the accusative of primary reference. Put simply, the latter explicated a verb-noun relationship (kāraka syntax), the former related two nominals, and was not a kāraka.

(3) Bhartṛhari. The « karman » attributed to the philosophical grammarian Bhartṛhari, and accorded a separate and distinct entry in the lexicon of Tarkavācaspati, cannot be discussed in fact without entering upon the second topic that we proposed dealing with in this paper:

(B) The significance of karman in and to syntax. Pāṇini's gloss of karma « īpsitatamam » is given flesh in the medieval semantic grammars in the following way: in every act designated by a verbal root (e.g. « to go » or « to cook ») are two complementary semantic aspects: a function/process or vyāpāra, indicating the change per se, and the fruit, or phala, indicating the tendency or end of that change²⁶. As the commentaries illustrate, the « function » in cooking is the series of motions involved, the placing of the coals, the lighting of the fire, the blowing

24. Vākyapadīya 3 (sādhana), 45 (IYER ed., p. 266).

25. P 1.4.50-51; also Vākyapadīya 3 (sādhana), 46 (IYER ed., ibid.).

26. Vaiyākaraṇabhūṣaṇasāra 2 (KSS 188, 1969), p. 11; Paramalaghumañjūṣā (Bārda Research Ser., § 7, 1961), p. 89, etc.

on the embers, etc., whereas the « result » is the moistening of the grain. In « going », similarly, the « function » is the leaving of the place occupied, while the « result » is the attainment of the next place. That these two aspects of verbality are general, and not as might at first be supposed limited to transitive verbs is established also by examples: